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ABSTRACT

The International Taskforce on Literacy, which is composed of nongovernmental organizations, has carried the literacy message to people everywhere. Two particularly noteworthy activities of the Taskforce are the People's Launch of International Literacy Year at the International Council for Adult Education conference in Thailand in January 1990 and the Book Launch. The theory, methodology, and practice of the literacy movement has evolved considerably and for the better over the past 2 decades. The first stage was the equating of nonformal education with literacy training in developing countries. The next stage, primarily in developing countries, involved an attempt to tie literacy and numeracy training to specific work situations to keep learners motivated. Problems that arose in this stage included the issue of empowerment and the language question, that is, teaching the native language or English. In a possible third stage, illiteracy was seen as a problem for the developed as well as developing countries. A new development emerged, a thrust to involve learners in assessing their own needs. This involvement would allow learners to participate in program planning, design, and implementation. One more stage in the literacy movement is the illiteracy that all share in a developing world. Even educated people are illiterate in many aspects of life, such as technology, health, human communications, social reform, or spirituality. (YLB)

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REFLECTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

by

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for

The Pre-Confernce on International Adult Education
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Everyone knows that this is International Literacy Year, and the beginning of the International Literacy Decade, and probably most adult educators know that the International Council for Adult Education has had the privilege and challenge of heading up the International Taskforce on Literacy, composed of non-governmental organizations.

When the United Nations designated 1990 as International Literacy Year, it gave the charge to UNESCO to carry out the program. Great credit is due our International Council for Adult Education for taking a very important initiative in this work. Governments can and must play an important role, but non-governmental organizations must play a significant role as well. As a recognized member of the NGO Standing Committee of UNESCO, ICAE proposed a non-governmental taskforce be established to aid in carrying the message to the people themselves everywhere. To this end around 35 internationally recognized NGO's banded together and elected ICAE to coordinate the program which was funded by about seven agencies in a number of countries. Working with interested persons in a large number of countries, through meetings, conferences and publications, and with the help of media agencies from a considerable number of countries, the International Task Force on Literacy has literally carried the message to the ends of the earth. Two particular activities require special mention--the People's Launch of Literacy Year at the ICAE conference in Thailand in January of 1990 and the Book Launch.

New literate learners from all the regions of the world and Thie royalty accompanied international leaders in adult education in a celebration that moved the hearts and minds of the 600

delegates to the conference. An excellent multi-media program which brought home the urgency of this work, was followed by an open air cermoney with the releasing of a sky-full of balloons all carrying messages, and this to the music of marching bands setting the pace for the dozens of persons needed to carry the huge banners from each region. Dame Nita Barrow, outgoing President of the ICAE was the M.C. for the Book Launch, in which newly literate persons from each region brought forward and dedicated their large books of blank pages which were to go back to the regions to be filled by the testimonies of other new literate persons, to be presented to the United Nations on Human Rights Day in December. Twilight deepended into darkness, with hundreds of conferees holding roses and lighted candles, a Thai custom symbolizing the light of knowledge.

What is the literacy message and what is the urgency? Various figures relating to the increasing number of illiterates in the world are before us constantly now in the media. We are told by Lalita Ramdas in a recent issue of Convergence (1990a)in the year 1970, for instance, the number of illiterates in the world over the age of 15 was around 760 million, and that by the year 2000 that number will have increased to approximately 900 million.

The urgency confronts us. In a world culture which is becomming increasingly literate in that all technological, scientific, political, and economic progress depends on the written word, equality of human rights for those who have not achieved literacy and numeracy is impossible. This idea offends us and motivates us--those of us who are literate and who care about all the world's people--and it especially offends

illiterate persons who are deprived of the opportunities available to literate persons. Beyene Abraha, of Ethiopia, quoted in the February 1990 issue of the Newsletter of the International Task Force on Literacy, says

> Illiteracy has to be combated because it is the enemy of the people, it is darkness, it makes people unreceptive to new ideas and change, it hinders development, it exposes people to brutal exploitation and oppression, and it is also an obstacle to people participating fully in economic, social and cultural activities.

This is a powerful message. The United Nations has heard it, and the ICAE, as well as governments and funding agencies. However, there are some caveats which must also be understood. We all recognize that the condition of illiteracy does not preclude wisdom, and that oral cultures have developed mental abilities that are often lost in literate cultures, We are also becoming aware that the world-wide focus on literacy can have a negative effect in that sensitive persons do not want to be considered "dumb", and, therefore, hide their illiteracy even more. Additionally, literacy and numeracy education can be either transformative to empower the people, or adaptive to control the people.

A further caveat concerns the promises made in the name of literacy. James Draper (1990) and Michael D. James (1990) have spoken to this issue in recent publications. Pablo Freire, speaking on a panel at Cecil Community College in Maryland a few years ago, admitted that he once believed that if oppressed people became literate, they would then take the action necessary to empower themselves, and only later came to realize that such action requires further education or enlightenment. Michael James addresses the "mystification" of literacy, suggesting that the capacity of literacy may be overstated.

Similarly, James Draper suggests that literacy by itself cannot help the disadvantaged or oppressed free themselves from dependency by becoming self-assertive. Both writers suggest that literacy must be taught in conjunction with other significant learning if it is to fulfill a transformative purpose.

The theory, methodology and practice of the literacry movement has evolved considerably and for the better, over the past two decades. Obviously, literacy training has followed no clear path and it has been carried out in many spots on the globe in many different ways. However, there seem to be some trends and I can only speak for the way I have experienced them from reading and travel.

It seemed in the early days that non-formal education was most often equated with literacy training, and we saw pictures of adults in Developing Countries sitting under a banana, fig or banyan tree drawing out letters and words in the sand, learning pretty much as children are taught. Many instances were reported of men refusing to study with women, and, as a matter-of-fact disapproving of literacy for women altogether. At this stage, there was not much concern about illiteracy in the more developed countries.

The next stage was still a phenomenon of developing coutries, in which an attempt was made to tie literacy and numeracy training to specific work situations in order to keep the learners motivated so that they would find their learning useful and not drop out. This was a decided improvement, especially for women who were becoming involved in income-generating projects.

Simultaneously, Paulo Freire's book Pedagogy of the

Oppressed appeared and his method of tying literacy training to conscientization generally began to carry some influence in any number of countries but the progress was slow and even today most literacy training, as I see it, is not intended to directly empower persons, even though the words and method of Paulo Freire are often evoked. However, as Freire himself discovered in Guinea-Bissau, his method only works where there is at least some minimal political freedom.

In this second stage also, new more complicated problems began to emerge, such as the language question. In Kenya, for example, the policy was to begin literacy training in the mother tongue, and move from there into Kswahili. But I remember very clearly the problem of a literacy teacher in a village near the Ugandan border who told me that her students complained about learning in the mother tongue and Kswahili. They said that since she spoke English when she left the village, why was she not teaching them in English. We have to remember that even illiterate persons have transistor radios and have some understanding of the locus of power in this world.

In a possible third stage, as I arbitrarily denote it, at last illiteracy was seen as a problem for developed as well as developing countries. And why? I believe this came about because of economic concerns. In developing countries, a motivating factor had always been economic. How could countries take their place in the modern technological society without literate workers? Now, with the near zero population growth in some more developed countries, training workers took on new importance as every sector of the population was scoured to find new workers. However, there is not too much reason to believe

that the economic interests are also pushing for social transformation which they might see as working against their interests. In any case, literacy training for workers does not prove very much when the economic structure gives no opportunities for upward mobility. I was much impressed by this point made by Dr. H. S. Bhola a couple years ago at a seminar in the United States Department of Education, upon his return from Namibia where he had been evaluating a program for USAID.

At this third stage, a very important new development emerged, a much-needed development to which we had been blind for more than two decades. This new thrust was to involve the learner in assessing his or her own needs, to allow the learner to participate in planning the learning program, its purpose, and the methods to be used. It does not sound very radical to me, and probably not to you, but we have just barely started down this road, and I doubt that if you checked out the literacy programs in your city or town, you would find many examples of programs where the learner has much say about the program. Here are wise words from Dame Nita Barrow:

> To be able to overcome illiteracy, go to the people, learn from them and then you will know how to teach them (1990a) [and] If people feel you are interested in them, giving them respect, open to them, and not trying to fool them; they will respect you as well. The negation of respect in a person because of their social and or economic position is one of the biggest barriers to mutual understanding...If you are talking to people in a community you don't ask them how many literate people live in their village, you ask them what improvements they need. You make that the focal point and literacy as the means of getting to it. (1990b)

I believe that if we are to make any real progress in the literacy movement, it will be because we listened to the learners and learned from them. This idea is probably the most important development in all of the literacy movement. Isn't it amazing

that it has taken us so long to discover it, and it is still quite unacceptable? For like formal traditional education, literacy education often has little connection to politics or social action and therefore to social transformation. To be sure, there are exceptions, perhaps more in developing countries than in the United States. But we do have some projects here where literacy is not an end itself, but one tool in the wholistic purpose of empowerment.

There is one more stage in the literacy movement that must be mentioned and that is the illiteracy we all share--we are all in a developing world. Even educated persons are illiterate in many aspects of life, whether these be technology, health, human communications, social reform, or spirituality. We may be tempted to think of these illiteracies as being on a completely different plane than what the world calls illiteracy, but really they are not. The purpose of learning to read and write and number is to enhance the quality of life. The illiteracies we all share must be overcome if we wish to enhance the quality of life. This understanding then could help to keep us humble as we face the problems of other illiterates at home in our country and at home in our world.

A poem composed by an illiterate woman in India speaks to the point. You may have heard it, but we all need to hear it again:

"What kind of people are we?
We are poor, very poor
but we are not stupid.
That is why, despite our illiteracy, we
still exist.
But we have to know
Why we should become literate.
We joined the literacy classes before,
but after some time, we got wise.
We felt cheated. So we left the classes.
What they taught us was useless.

To sign one's name means nothing.
We agree to join the classes
if you teach us how not to depend
on others any more.
We should be able to read simple books,,
keep our accounts, write a letter and
read and understand newspapers.
We are not empty pitchers.
We have minds of our own.
We can reason out things.
and, believe it or not,
we also have dignity.
Can literacy help us live
a little better? Starve a little less?
Would it guarantee that the mother
and the daughter won't have to
share the same sari between them?
Would it fetch us a newly-thatched roof
over our heads?
One more thing...
Why do our teachers feel so superior?
They behave as if we are ignorant fools,
as if we are little children.
They say that there are laws to protect
and benefit us. We don't know these laws.
Would we know the laws that have changed
The status of women? and the laws that
protect the tribals among us?
We want a straight answer.
Then we shall decide whether
we should become literate or not.
But if we find out that we
are being duped again
with empty promises,
we will stay away from you." (Ramdas, 1990b)

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